

THE HOOK

by Lynda Carraher

Cadet Reuben Blackthorn stretched out, feet toward the fire, elbows propped on his backpack, and gazed up at the stars. The ease with which he -- all right, with which his test partner -- had figured out where the devil the notorious "Planet X" really was, had made him feel quite confident that the pair of them would be able to finish the second day's tasks with relative ease. Assuming, of course, that the ultra-relaxed Blackthorn didn't go wacky from spending 60 hours with a nit-picking Vulcan.

Take the way Cadet Spock had responded to Blackthorn's perfectly reasonable inclusion in their food supply of a time-honored item. Being a friendly type, and knowing Spock had probably never performed this particular ceremony, Blackthorn had handed over his very own perfectly balanced green stick, pre-threaded with three perfectly impaled spheres of fluff.

Spock had looked at the item in puzzlement. "And this is...?"

"They're marshmallows."

"There are no marshes on this planet." At his partner's puzzled look, Spock had elaborated. "Our food supply is required to be composed entirely of standard survival

meals, supplemented by native flora and fauna. Since there are no marshes--"

"You don't need marshes for marshmallows."

"Then why--"

"I don't know. Doesn't matter. Just . . . hold the stick over the fire. Like this." He had demonstrated with the other stick, a slightly bent and flimsy specimen, compared to the one he had courteously offered his partner. "You want them to toast, see, but you have to be careful not to--"

Too late, he had looked up to see Spock's marshmallows flaming merrily. "No, no! You gotta--" And as had he reached out in what was obviously a too-late attempt to save the small black nuggets on Spock's stick, his own confections had burst into flame.

No, the marshmallow-toasting exercise had not gone well at all.

Blackthorn resumed his study of the stars.

"This sure is a lonesome place," he said, almost to himself. Unfortunately, he failed to specify that the remark was essentially rhetorical, and Cadet Spock dutifully pointed out the illogic of his companion's observation.

"Of course. One would hardly expect a test of ingenuity and survival skills to be held in a heavily populated locale."

Undaunted, Blackthorn continued his reverie. "Kinda reminds me of a spot back home where we used to go to watch the submarine races."

"Excuse me . . . are not submarines constructed to perform beneath the surface of the ocean?"

"Sure."

"And did you not tell me your home was located in ... Kansas?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then how..." Lean jaws snapped shut on the question. "Never mind."

Blackthorn enjoyed the discovery that his partner's goat might just barely be gettable. He located and removed the rock which had been trying to burrow into his backside, examined its contours, and made a lazy toss that sent it arcing precisely between their two survival tents. The ones it had taken them two hours to erect. More correctly, it had taken him two hours to set his up, since the snap-open design would neither snap nor open. Spock, of course, had his set up in approximately 90 seconds. Oh, yes, his Vulcan classmate really had this one coming.

"Yessir," Blackthorn continued. "Just exactly like that spot. Lotsa stars. Pretty little creek. 'Course, some people were a little spooked about goin' there, it bein' so far out in the boonies and all." He snatched at a small mothlike insect, examined it in the firelight, and then let it go. "A friend of

mine told me about this cousin of his, was taking his girlfriend home after a dance one time, and he wanted to park--"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would the young man wish to cease operation of the vehicle in an isolated location prior to completion of their journey?" "Aw, come on, don't tell me Vulcan's don't... Oh, hell. PARKING. Necking. Squeeze a little of this, poke a little of that. YOU know!"

"Oh. I see. Pre-coital stimulation."

Blackthorn considered his own somewhat frustrating erotic experiences with young ladies and parking places. "I guess you never dated any Catholics," he said. "Anyhow, this friend of my cousin's--"

"I thought it was the cousin of your friend."

"Whatever. They were necking and smooching and kissing away, when she turned on the carvid--"

"Is that customary?"

"What?"

"To supplement pre-coital stimulation by the viewing of documentary or entertainment presentations."

"Look, she turned on the damn carvid. You wanna hear this story or not?"

"Not particularly."

"Well, I wanna tell it. So shut up." His bony backside discovered another rock. This one, too, was dislodged and tossed this time into the creek that ran below the campsite. Blackthorn resumed his tale. "She turned on the carvid, see, and the newscast was on, and there was this story about some homicidal maniac that had got loose from the prison hospital, and the thing of it was, see, he had this HOOK instead of a hand."

"A prosthesis."

"No -- a HOOK. Like a meat hook."

"I am a vegetarian."

"Like a cargo hook then, okay? I mean this big sharp metal sucker shaped like a question mark, with a point on the end of it."

"Why was this individual not fitted with a proper prosthetic device? Rehabilitation of the criminally insane should properly begin--"

"WILL YOU PLEASE LET ME FINISH THIS STORY?"

"If you insist."

"Okay. So this story comes on, and she gets really upset and wants to go home, and he wants to stay, and they argue about it and finally she wins and they leave. Only when they get to her house and he comes around to open the door for here . . . there's a HOOK caught on the latch."

Blackthorn was sitting forward now, watching for signs of gooseflesh on his companion's skin. There was no visible response to the grisly tale. "Well?" he demanded. "Well, whaddya think?"

For the first time since their instructors abandoned them, Spock's response was hesitant. "I must admit to a certain amount of puzzlement," he said.

"Puzzlement? PUZZLEMENT ? ? ! ! The guy was OUT THERE, man, with his HOOK!

If they hadn't left when they did, he'd have GOT 'em!"

"I hardly think so." Overriding Blackthorn's protest, Spock continued, "If I recall correctly, most private transport vehicles on Terra have a common latch design. It requires that the fingers be inserted into a niche, providing anchorage, while the release mechanism is depressed firmly with the thumb. Such a device would be inoperable by an individual with the sort of primitive prosthetic you have described. In addition, I find myself wondering what kind of penal or medical authorities would allow a potentially violent individual to retain such a lethal weapon as part of his accouterments. And furthermore--"

"Okay. I surrender. I'm sorry I brought it up. I was just trying to pass the time." There was no response from across the fire, and Blackthorn mumbled, "I suppose nothing like that ever happens on Vulcan."

"Hardly." The fire popped loudly, and then Spock's voice

continued, "However, I do recall that a roommate of my father's clan-cousin once purchased a sehlat to act as a guard animal, since she lived near an area frequented by various unsavory types. One day, she returned home from a shopping trip to find the animal having some kind of seizure. She took it to a veterinary healer at once, of course, and the healer did emergency surgery to remove a blockage in the animal's esophagus...

THE END